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THE EARLY WRITINGS OF GATIEN DE COURTILZ, SIEUR DE VERGER

I have tried elsewhere to show that the pseudo-*Mémoires* of Courtilz are forerunners of the politico-picaresque novel in France, and that Lesage may have found, at least to some degree, a model among his own countrymen. Courtilz did not begin with *Mémoires*; a study of his earlier works will, I believe, prove that they embody all the essential features of the *Mémoires*, and that they owe little or nothing to foreign influence.

The first pamphlets attributed to him, both published in 1683, are: *La Conduite de la France depuis la paix de Nimègue* and *Réponse au livre intitulé: "La Conduite,"* etc. Such political pamphlets were popular at the time, and the frequently envenomed answers served to increase their success. All we know of Courtilz supports the hypothesis that he was a man to sacrifice sincerity to pecuniary interest. In the *Réponse* there is an obvious effort to advertise the *Conduite*. If Courtilz was cashiered from the army, as some authorities state, a lingering bitterness against his country may have led to the composition of the *Conduite* and some of the other abusive pamphlets. But it is scarcely necessary to seek in such libels for stronger reasons than the desire to turn a penny by spreading scandal. The perpetration of such literature was a dangerous trade—the Archives of the Bastille offer proof—and nobody wished to be implicated in it. Hence the author of the *Réponse* is at no small pains to distinguish himself from the writer of the *Conduite*. After addressing to his antagonist every kind of insult, he makes a criticism which might be extended to all the works of Courtilz. The proverbial thief has caught the thief. "Je tâcherai de [le] réfuter—en faisant toucher au doigt et à l'œil combien il s'abuse dans ses raisonnements, que je dirais qu'il aurait puisés entièrement dans les Gazettes, n'était qu'il y ajoute beaucoup du sien, afin comme je crois, de déguiser le vol qu'il y a fait."

We may pass rapidly over these first pamphlets. The *Conduite* is a violent attack on the French king and his policies. The *Réponse* turns back on the author of the *Conduite* the abuse the latter had

hurled at Louis XIV, refutes a part of his statements, and contradicts the rest. It is a plea in behalf of the French king, using for his defense the very arguments with which he was assailed. France has always desired peace, and if the treaty of Nimègue has remained unfulfilled, the fault lies at the door of those "qui avaient si peu de penchant à la conclure, c.-à-d. l'Espagne et l'Empire."

If Courtilz is really the author of both pamphlets, he has succeeded so well in presenting the case for and against France that C. Rousset believed two authors concerned, one in the pay of Louvois, the other his implacable enemy. This is neither the first nor the last time that the writings of Courtilz have passed as having more historical value than they merit.

In the same year there appeared a little book entitled *Mémoires contenant divers événements remarquables*, etc. The ostensible purpose of the work is to eulogize the existing government of Colbert and Louvois by contrast with the disorder of the last years of Louis XIII and the Fronde. But the greater part of the volume is occupied with the Fronde, because Courtilz takes delight in these scenes of revolt from established authority. The apology of the book, which is destined to become a sort of refrain in Courtilz' prefaces, is of some interest: "Je rapporterai seulement quelques circonstances qui ont été omises, ou par dessein ou pour n'avoir pas été sues de ceux qui en ont écrit, ajoutant pour la satisfaction du lecteur que je ne dirai rien que je ne sache bien, et dont ceux qui étaient de ce temps-là dans les affaires les plus secrètes ne puissent rendre témoignage aussi bien que moi." Here, as always, Courtilz uses this pretext to give free rein to his instinct for scandalous gossip and to pose as a detective in unearthing unsavory secrets in the life of the great. Surely most of the actors in the Fronde were inspired by selfish motives, but Courtilz is in no way of diminishing their pettiness. He is forever in search of some scabrous anecdote, which, he would have us believe, contains the inside history of the cause of significant events.

These first pamphlets show the author joining the ranks of the anonymous scribblers who attacked the policy of the king. They are interesting chiefly as revealing the Frondeur spirit which permeates Courtilz' writings. There is also discernible in germ the

instinct of the political picaro, for this obscure soldier sets himself up as a judge of the action of the great king. We have now to consider another aspect of the same spirit, for Courtilz busied himself also in hawking society scandal. Decency forbids any detailed discussion of the libels attributed to him; they are of interest only as an indication of his taste for this sort of anecdote.

It is well known that the success of Bussy's *Histoire Amoureuse*¹ gave rise to a number of imitations entirely unworthy of the original. Courtilz, always well informed of the taste of the pamphlet-reading public, was naturally led to try his hand at this game also. His efforts bear the mark of hasty composition and lack entirely Bussy's brilliance of style. Addressed to a very different public, they offer only coarseness of anecdote, yet it must be admitted that the aristocratic or ancillary adventures attributed to king and courtiers are related with much vivacity by a master of the *esprit gaulois* in its ruder form. The same talent for rapid narration and burlesque scene figures conspicuously in the *Mémoires*. Such satire directed by a commoner against the high and mighty of the realm is the theme of the *Annales de la cour et de Paris* (1701). The latter work drew from Bayle the following significant comment:

Toutes ces pièces [he has just named *Les Annales* and a number of other works attributed to Courtilz] sont de la façon de l'auteur des *Mémoires du Comte de Rochefort*—même genre, même style et même hardiesse de médire de tout le monde, et de s'y débiter pour un personnage qui a eu part aux intrigues, et qui sait *quid rex reginae dixerat, et quid Juno fabulata est cum Jove*. Cependant c'est un petit particulier sans bien, sans fortune, et qui apparemment n'écrit tout cela que pour le vendre aux libraires de Hollande. Il faut pourtant qu'il ait quelque habitude avec les fainéants de Paris qui lui apprennent tout ce qui s'y conte de vrai ou de faux entre les novellistes.

Doubtless morality in high places left much to be desired, but all these libels are characterized by a desire to blacken the court for the amusement of the vulgar herd. Their aim is to show in a grotesque manner that the great king, for all his glory and military prowess, is subject to the same low passions as the least of his pages and the humblest of comedians.

¹ Of course similar libels had been published before Bussy's work. For a characteristic example see Janmart de Brouillant, *Histoire de Pierre de Marteau* (Paris, 1888).

Les Nouveaux Intérêts des Princes de l'Europe, published in 1685, formulates a political doctrine which is found in all the writings of Courtilz. The journalistic nature of this book soon obliged the author to revise it; enlarged editions appeared in 1686 and 1688. The work claims our interest by its matter and by its method.

Lenglet Dufresnoy, who detested Courtilz as a fabricator of falsehood that passed for history, pronounces a criticism which is too severe to be just. He denounces our author as a bungling plagiarist of the Duc de Rohan, whose tiny book, *De l'Intérêt des Princes et Etats de la Chrétienté*, appeared in 1639. As in fact Courtilz' work is a perpetual application of Rohan's treatise to actual problems, a rapid survey of the latter may be in order. The first part is a summary discussion of the maxims which a state should follow; the second, a chronicle intended as an illustration. The maxims offer nothing particularly original. Almost all can be found in the political writings of Machiavelli. Rohan begins by naming two powers, France and Spain, which maintain the European equilibrium. The other nations should join now one now the other to prevent either from becoming too powerful. He then sets forth maxims for the use of the different countries in the aggrandizement of their dominion. The maxims for Spain are characteristic and may be briefly summarized:

First, the nations must rid themselves of the idea that religion is anything but a mantle in politics. For example, the king of Spain should profit by the religious wars in France, England, and the Empire. Secondly, each nation must maintain a system of secret negotiations (*intelligences*) in foreign lands—

ce qu'il faut faire par la voie des ambassadeurs, . . . par les moines et prédicateurs, . . . par l'argent. Surtout il faut s'attacher à gagner les principaux ministres—ou rendre odieux ceux qu'on trouvera trop fidèles, et en toute manière les perdre. Le troisième point touche les négociations et traités, auxquels il faut employer des personnes secrètes et patientes, montrer toujours un désir de paix pour endormir les autres, et cependant se préparer à la guerre pour les surprendre au dépourvu. S'il arrive dispute entre deux petits princes, il faut s'entremettre de leur accommodement, ou comme juge ou comme arbitre, et en l'une et l'autre qualité avoir, s'il se peut, en dépôt ce qui est en débat entre eux, les aigrir—au lieu de les adoucir, s'accommoder avec l'un pour partager les dépouilles de l'autre et sur le

partage déposséder tous les deux. Ne perdre aucune occasion de s'entre-mettre des affaires de ses voisins, mais exclure les autres des siennes. Le quatrième point consiste à être toujours puissamment armé; c'est un moyen assuré pour tenir en devoir ses sujets, et en respect ses voisins: pour les surprendre s'ils s'endorment et pour se prévaloir des occasions inopinées. Le cinquième point est la réputation.

Rohan gives briefly general maxims: Courtilz, while keeping the maxims, develops and particularizes the thought; he studies it in its relation to contemporary events. Hence he is not always at one with his model. For instance, in speaking of the interests of the Holy See, Rohan states that the pope should rely on the power of excommunication to maintain his influence. This counsel, which is opposed to the spirit of the work toward religion, is repudiated by Courtilz, who treats the papacy as any other power and recommends the same policy to all. His style is incisive: "il ne faut plus que les papes prétendent élever leur pouvoir en se servant du prétexte de la religion, qui est une ruse maintenant trop connue pour avoir un bon effet. Les mesures qu'ils ont à prendre doivent être et plus ingénieuses et plus délicates."

Courtilz proposed Louis XIV as his model and held him up to other princes as an example. This is not a retraction of what he had written in his first pamphlets; means had become indifferent to him, and he judges the king of France the ideal monarch because he had best attained his aim—the aggrandizement of his personnel power. Hence the author has unstinted praise for what, two years before, had apparently so scandalized him. His admiration for the policy of the great king persists in the *Mémoires*, and although he attacks sharply ministers and nobles, he has nothing but praise for the royal ordinances.

Moreover, Courtilz is under no illusion as to the bearing of the *Nouveaux Intérêts*; like Machiavelli, he disavows all moral responsibility:

Nous savons bien que quelque adresse qu'emploie un prince, cela ne l'autorise pas à faire une injustice, supposé que ce qu'il entreprit fût injuste; le fond d'une affaire ne change point, quoiqu'on y donne une autre face; mais ce n'est pas de cela que nous traitons ici; notre unique dessein est de faire voir comment il faut qu'un empereur s'y prenne pour prendre plus d'autorité qu'il n'en a dans l'empire. Si cela est juste ou non, si cela est

conforme ou contraire aux lois du pays; c'est ce que nous ne prétendons pas de décider: pourvu que nous donnions une idée qui réponde à notre sujet, nous ne nous mettons pas en peine du reste.

Many a Machiavellian trait could be cited;¹ the author supports his theories by examples from contemporary history, and doubtless would have answered critics in the words of the great Florentine, saying that he did but put at the service of princes what their politics had taught him. In a similar way he might have defended the exposition of social sores in his pamphlets and *Mémoires* by saying with the moralist that he returned to society only what he learned from it.

I have said that the *Nouveaux Intérêts* are, from a double point of view, characteristic of the spirit of the writings of Courtilz. First, they offer a precious index to the psychology of his heroes, for there is found constantly in his *Mémoires* indulgence for the theory which subordinates everything to the interest of state or king. Secondly, the book marks the author's inclination to criticize the actions of princes; he is in accord with the mot of Machiavelli which the picaros appropriated to their own use: "A conoscer bene quella [la natura] de' principi bisogna esser popolare." We may notice also the tendency which persists in all Courtilz' works to busy himself with universal politics. Many pages of his *Mémoires* might find a fitting place in the *Nouveaux Intérêts*.

Moreover, the book permits us to understand the method of Courtilz by the contrast it offers with the work of Rohan. The latter prescribes general maxims, good for all epochs, in Machiavelli's manner. Courtilz' borrowings prove that the principles were not, as he pretends, superannuated. Rohan considers politics *sub specie aeternitatis*, while our author studies events from day to day, trying to seize the significance of each change and to make his conclusions conform to the actual phase. He had his eyes on the men and problems of the moment and sought to paint them to the life. He uses everywhere the same method. His *Mémoires* often begin in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, for he liked to portray the scenes of the ministry of Richelieu and of the Fronde, but

¹ It may be worth mention that a translation of the *Prince* by Amelot de la Housaye appeared in 1683. A second edition appeared in 1684, and a third in 1686. The political writings of Machiavelli had been translated several times before.

the narrative closes near the time of its composition. "Il serait à désirer que ceux qui se mêlent d'écrire nous donnassent l'histoire de nos jours," he says in one of his prefaces. For his part he transformed this history into novels, but into novels which passed for history. To deceive his contemporaries thus he must perforce have an eye on actuality. There is the secret of his realism.

We have seen that the first works of Courtilz are frankly cynical and satiric. But if he poses as scandalized by the conduct of the great and the intrigues of the court, he had studied everything with a minute attention and took pleasure in painting in detail the intimate lives of the world's masters whose pretensions exposed them to his ridicule. The heroes of the *Mémoires* adopt the same methods he had used himself in his early works.

More interesting than any of these are the biographies of the Vicomte de Turenne and of the Amiral de Coligny; the one immediately preceded, the other followed, the author's first attempt at memoirs. Both contain prefaces which merit passing attention. As a foreword to the *Vie de Turenne* the "editor" states that he is publishing a manuscript found among the papers of the late Captain Du Buisson, who in turn claims to be the first biographer of Turenne. For fear of giving offense to living persons, he declares his intention "de retenir son œuvre au fond d'un coffre jusqu'à ce qu'on l'en retire après sa mort si on la juge digne d'être mise en lumière." Du Buisson nowhere declares himself in the intimacy of Turenne and does not pretend to special sources of information. He nowhere names himself in his book, which is written in the third person. As proof of his competency in military affairs he states that he has been a soldier all his life. Courtilz' object seems to have been to secure for his work the interest of a first biography.

In the *Vie de Coligny* (1686) is found for the first time an artifice which becomes familiar in his subsequent works. The author declares himself sprung from a house allied to that of Coligny and claims to possess documents hitherto unused. The advantage gained by such a pretension is evident. The reading public, at a time when critical methods were in their infancy, would be slow to contradict a man so well equipped. Having once invented this artifice, Courtilz had no intention of abandoning it. So hereafter

when we read of the secret policies and actions of ministers in memoirs of which the supposed authors claim to relate only what has passed before their eyes, we are to remember that the heroes have served the government for years in secret missions.

The biographies read like novels and they have many traits in common with the *Mémoires* which followed. To mention but one: a duel (the best known being that of D'Artagnan) figures conspicuously at the beginning of the career of almost all Courtilz' heroes. The same device appears in both biographies; Turenne's nascent belligerency is, to be sure, quashed by his mother, but the youthful Coligny kills his adversary.

As an old soldier Courtilz could appreciate military qualities, and he took pleasure in portraying Coligny and Turenne as perfect captains and as gentlemen without reproach. There is an instinct for hero-worship even in the picaros. So, although here as everywhere, he cannot resist the temptation to write the entire history of the epoch, he reveals the intimate character of these men by constant anecdote, at the same time showing their rôle in great political events. He insists on the good discipline they maintained by their personal interest in the troops, on the simplicity of their manners, on their loyalty to their superiors and their kindness toward their dependents. He is never tired of contrasting their blunt honesty and sincerity with the duplicity of politicians. It may be noted that the queen regent as portrayed in the *Vie de Coligny* offers a striking parallel with the Mazarin of the *Mémoires*.

Here, as always, Courtilz bases his claim to the reader's interest on the unpublished details he offers. A single one, admired by Bayle, may be cited for the light it throws on the necessity of caution in the reception of such anecdotes in his work. By way of illustrating the temperance of Turenne, the author relates his generous protection of a girl to whom a soldier was about to offer violence after the capture of a city. A similar incident is found in the revised edition of the biography where a fair captive is brought to Turenne as his share of the booty. A like story is told of Coligny. When we realize that the Sieur de Pontis tells in his *Mémoires*, which Courtilz certainly knew, how he had saved the honor of a girl at the capture of Negrepelice, that Pontis may well have appropriated the anecdote

from the *Gestes ensemble la Vie du Preulx Chevalier Bayard*, our skepticism grows apace and we wonder whether Alexander's courtesy to Timoclea is not father to all the rest.

Indeed, there are many incidents which recall Plutarch, and Courtilz is constantly comparing Coligny and Turenne to Alexander. At all events, we must admit that Courtilz appropriated something of Plutarch's idea of biography. At the beginning of the life of Nicias, Plutarch says: "Au demeurant je me suis étudié de recueillir des choses qui ne sont pas communes à tout le monde, que d'autres ont par-ci par-là écrites ou que j'ai retirées de quelques antiquailles ou de quelques anciens registres, dont j'ai tissé une narration qui ne sera point, ce me semble, inutile, ains servira beaucoup à connaître les mœurs et la nature du personnage." Courtilz also liked to cite personal traits and apothegms of his heroes. Thus we learn of Turenne's hatred of tobacco and intoxication, and of the means he took to cure his officers of the second vice. Again, we hear Coligny expressing the stoic indifference of the warrior toward death or his scorn for soldiers who trick themselves out like court ladies. The words are always accompanied by an anecdote showing the hero in action, for it is thus that Courtilz paints men.

The picaresque as well as the heroic genre has its roots in this method of drawing character. Anecdotes and jests may well become, in the hands of the picaros, a sharp weapon of satire. It is only necessary to choose other incidents or tell them with a different twist to bring out the ridiculous side and mark the points of contact common to great and humble. Courtilz had done this in the satiric pamphlets; he was to do it again in the *Mémoires*.

What has been said of these first writings of Courtilz may suffice to indicate the main lines of the work. I have tried to trace its evolution and indicate its origins: these owed little or nothing to foreign sources. He drew his matter from reality: from the manners of men who lived around him, from recent or contemporary history, even from newspapers, as a realist of our day. He himself avows it. An old soldier, always endowed with a keen faculty of observation, he had garnered a rich harvest of military anecdotes. His childhood was passed under the Fronde, a time when traditional dignity was greatly weakened, and the spirit of those tumultuous years was

imprinted in him. Hence he loves to return to those scenes and show princes and nobles in revolt against their sovereign. On the one occasion when he treated an epoch far removed from his own, he chose a rebel for the subject of his eulogy. We have seen that his political philosophy is most cynical; his conception of life was the same. There are no good women in his pages, and his men are first cousins to the picaros. We could not expect pastoral or idyllic novels from such a man; he will be necessarily a realist and his realism will bear on the lower aspects of human nature. He sees only a struggle of all against all; each for himself is the universal motto. *Garde-toi d'être dupe* and *rie qui pourra* will be his philosophy of life.

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